Title of Paper: The Origins of Self-Help: Samuel Smiles and the Formative Influences on an Ex-Seminal Work
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Abstract: The essay seeks to supply some problematic or missing links to the elucidation of the issue about the origins of Self-Help.

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So common has been the opinion of scholars and critics that Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* represents just a trivial instance of middle-class thinking that, although voices to the contrary have been increasingly heard for more than sixty years, its powers to attract attention, rereading and research seem rather negligible nowadays. The situation looks particularly unnatural against the background of former glory. When the book appeared in 1859, it marked an almost immediate success, 20,000 copies being sold within a year after publication. Much later, when Smiles died in 1905, the total circulation bought by the reading public had reached 258,000. As Asa Briggs formulated it from an enlighteningly wider perspective, “these sales far exceeded those of the great nineteenth-century novels” (Briggs 126).¹

Not everything is a question of perspective, though. Once the Victorian period ended, Smiles’s literary status fell so abruptly and irretrievably that although there has been some revival of interest in him, ever since Asa Briggs’s preface to the centenary edition of *Self-Help* in 1958, a lot is still to be done to redress the balance. One instance among many, Smiles still awaits his representative biography to be written. Among the few book-length studies that feature him,² most offer narrow thematic foci, one is a memoir written by his granddaughter, and one, Adrian Jarvis’s *Samuel Smiles and the Construction of Victorian Values* (1997), however comprehensive in intent, actually offers a wide range of narrow glimpses on the author’s life, literary activity and ideology. The rest is chapters in books on larger-than-Smiles topics as well as articles in journals and magazines. Due to this general situation, the accumulated knowledge about Smiles tends to lack unity and sometimes displays blank spots at unexpected places. One such issue, as I intend to show, is the very origins of “self-help”: the word, the notion and the title.

The way we know it, *Self-Help* is two things simultaneously. On the one hand, it is the title of a book extolling the practical benefits of character building, one which rose to high and staying acclaim throughout the best part of the Victorian era, and even these days seems to be recycled back to vicarious prominence by lending its name to a whole literary genre, the self-help manual. To its contemporary readers it offered a kind of a secular sermon expounding on the credo that success in life depends not on the givens of individual nature or society but on the steady work of the individual for his own improvement. The foregrounded qualities are perseverance, self-reliance, hard work, and a few others. It is less of a developed theory than a single core statement, “perseverance breeds success”, dispersed in many variations throughout the book, each of them backed by illustrations taken from the lives of worthy holders of the said qualities.³ On the other hand, *Self-Help* is emblematic of the whole Smilesian output. Smiles was a prolific author. He wrote a string of other

¹ Jerome Meckier calculates the first five hardback editions of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* as totalling “only” 3,750 copies (111).

² A. Smiles; Tyrrell, *Class-Consciousness*; Thornton; Travers; Jarvis, etc.

³ Adrian Jarvis says: “The treatment of almost every one of Smiles’s subjects is formulaic, and the formula is made to dance to the tune of *Self-Help.*” (72)
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titles (Character, Duty, Thrift, The Lives of the Engineers, Life and Labour) yet, even before he died, they remained in the public limelight as little more than additions to the “big book”. His very death came as if to confirm this, for his gravestone reads: “Samuel Smiles, author of Self-Help” (A. Smiles 195). Self-Help seems to have turned over time into a doctrinal space which is capable of absorbing any amount of further material, yet remains principally unchanged.

Now, in what way did the idea of self-help take shape in Smiles’s mind? To tackle the issue, some intrinsic biographical data would not be irrelevant. Samuel Smiles was born in the small town of Haddington, not far from Edinburgh, in 1812. In 1829 he went to study medicine at the Edinburgh University only to return to his birthplace three years later and start a doctor’s practice there. In 1838 he published his first book, Physical Education, but his first marked success with critics and readers was The Life of George Stephenson, Railway Engineer (1857), immediately followed by the seminal Self-Help (1859). The next several books, though never overshadowing the production of the late 1850s, contributed a lot to the consolidation of Smiles’s renown as a writer and sage. Meanwhile he worked as editor of Leeds Times in the period 1839-1845, then was consecutively secretary to the Leeds and Thirsk Railway and to the South Eastern Railway, to end the chain of his administrative posts as President of the National Provident Institution. Since the early 1860s he depended for his living mostly on his literary success. Towards the decline of the century his fame as much as his health waned. His death in 1904 came just a little too early to coincide with the publication of his Autobiography (1905).

The issue of the word and notion leading up to the title can serve as a particularly good example of what we both know and don’t know about Self-Help. Sadly, only a few scholars have treated the subject in some degree of depth. Part of the responsibility for this state of things certainly lies with the author himself. Apart from the general disfavour it experienced after the end of the Victorian period, Self-Help, in itself, is such a store of foregrounded message and subdual of self-reference that it tends to dissipate any readerly curiosity about formative backgrounds. To make matters still worse, Smiles is rarely lavish on the topic of his early sources. Still, there is in his Autobiography a telling passage:

My object in writing out Self-Help, and delivering it at first in the form of lectures, and afterwards rewriting and publishing it in the form of a book, was principally to illustrate and enforce the power of George Stephenson's great word — Perseverance. I had been greatly attracted when a boy by Mr Craik's Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties. I had read it often, and knew its many striking passages almost by heart. It occurred to me, that a similar treatise, dealing not so much with literary achievements and the acquisition of knowledge, as with the ordinary business and pursuits of common life, illustrated by examples of conduct and character drawn from reading, observation, and experience, might be equally useful to the rising generation. It seemed to me that the most important results in daily life are to be obtained, not

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4 A. Smiles; Briggs, Self-Help; Tyrrell; Travers; Morris.
through the exercise of extraordinary powers, such as genius and intellect, but through the energetic use of simple means and ordinary qualities, with which nearly all human individuals have been more or less endowed. (S. Smiles, *Autobiography*, 222)

The two volumes of John Lillie Craik’s *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties, Illustrated by Anecdotes* were published respectively in 1830 and 1831, so Smiles was not just “a boy” when he first read it. His familiarity with the book most probably dates from his student years at the University of Edinburgh where the intellectual climate was particularly favourable to new ideas in medicine, health and education (A. Smiles 26–31). Commissioned by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and published in the Society’s “Library of Entertaining Knowledge”, *The Pursuit of Knowledge* shares much of “the spirit of Birkbeck and Brougham” so intrinsic to “the establishment of Working Men’s Institutions, with their organisation of classes, lectures, and libraries” (S. Smiles, *Stephenson*, 401), a process of knowledge dissemination in which Smiles’s own native place, Haddington, was actively involved. 5 Craik’s work represents a call to “every man”6 for self-education as a means to counteracting unfavourable social circumstances, richly illustrated by examples taken from the lives of eminent people in history. Smiles, who was fascinated enough to learn “many striking passages almost by heart”, drew for his *Self-Help* much from Craik’s ideology, choice of composition, easiness of language and – last but not least – love of “self-” compounds.7

Another relevant – and curious – thing Smiles points to in the above excerpt is that he came to use “self-help” as an intensified substitute for “perseverance”, “George Stephenson’s great word”. All other things considered, it is not very clear why he needed an intensifier for that word at all. Also, why was it to him “George

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5 Expressly mentioned by Lord Brougham in one of his famous speeches in the House of Commons on the education of the underprivileged: “An excellent plan was about ten years ago adopted by Mr. S. Brown, of Haddington, for instructing the towns and villages of the county of East-Lothian, in succession, by means of the same books. It began with only a few volumes; but he now has 19 Itinerant Libraries of 50 volumes each, which are sent round the different stations, remaining a certain time at each.” (Brougham 9)

6 “We are about to select from the records of Philosophy, Literature, and Art, in all ages and countries, a body of examples, to shew how the most unpropitious circumstances have been unable to conquer an ardent desire for the acquisition of knowledge. Every man has difficulties to encounter in this pursuit; and therefore every man is interested in learning what are the real hindrances which have opposed themselves to the progress of some of the most distinguished persons, and how those obstacles have been surmounted.” (Craik 1, 1)

7 True to the goals of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, i.e. the inculcation of reading habits in hard-working, leisure-lacking people of limited means, Craik’s work abounds in words denoting individual effort, among them quite a lot of “self-” expressions: self-education, self-instruction, self-denial, self-improvement, etc.
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Stephenson’s”? The reference certainly points to The Life of George Stephenson, Railway Engineer (1857), the book Smiles wrote immediately prior to Self-Help:

The directors of the railway became alarmed, and they feared that the evil prognostications of the eminent civil engineers were now about to be realised. Mr. Stephenson was asked for his opinion, and his invariable answer was — "We must persevere." (S. Smiles, Stephenson, 257)

This was his grand text, — PERSEVERE. There was manhood in the very word. (S. Smiles, Stephenson, 401)

Now, what is the intended meaning of “persevere” in the two passages above? Is Smiles quoting? Or is he paraphrasing? He may be referring to a favourite expression of Stephenson’s; or else, he may be only attempting to trace a motivational drive in him. And there is yet another possibility: that the word had little to do with Stephenson, and much more with Smiles himself, a kind of a voluntary or involuntary self-reference. In other words, it may be a trace signalling that Smiles has inscribed parts of himself in the outlines of George Stephenson’s portrait – that he has integrated in it snatches of a vicarious self-account.

Actually, Smiles came from a deeply religious family which belonged to the small and uncompromising Cameronian Kirk, stringent in its Calvinist regulation of work, leisure and devotion and weathered in a history of mutual distrust with governmental power. And perseverance is an old theological term stemming from the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints” as it was first outlined by St. Augustine, in his tract On the Gift of Perseverance, and elaborated later by Calvin, among others. To Augustine, perseverance is a special gift of God, a sure sign of divine grace, because it is only those who are graced by God that can persevere in the faith to the end of their lives; the rest would lack the stamina not to swerve. Thus the idea of human godliness comes to be synonymous to the idea of a life span dedicated to unceasing toil and perseverance, for one can fall from grace even if one has stopped persevering a mere second before his or her death. Calvin’s version of the doctrine basically follows Augustine’s but there is one important point of discrepancy between the two. Unlike Augustine, Calvin affirms that a believer can become sure of his having received God’s grace even before dying: “Now when he [Christ] declares, ‘Every tree that my Father has not planted will be uprooted’ (Matt.15:13), he conversely implies that those rooted in God can never be pulled up from salvation” (Calvin, Institutes, 2: 972). What Calvin meant is that once a believer starts on the road to salvation the process is irreversible, because what God has planted in us in order to find the right direction “is incorruptible, retains its virtue perpetually” (Calvin, Commentaries, 214).9

8 The first English translation of St. Augustine’s De Dono Perseverantiae was published in 1556 in a joint volume with another treatise, De Praedestinatione Sanctorum, under the title Predestinacion of saintes, Perseveraunce unto thende.

9 See also for a particularly good commentary Davis 213-28.
We cannot know whether this evolving doctrine was elaborately known by Smiles’s father and grandfather, both of whom, in fact, were field-preachers, a practice much worshipped by Camerons and notorious among members of the more orthodox Protestant churches. Yet the word “perseverance” must at least have been well integrated in the family’s values and vocabulary while the author was still a child, for it seemingly remained vibrant in his mind ever since then, though divested of its narrowly religious significance. It emerges quite often as early as in Smiles’s first two books, Physical Education (1838) and History of Ireland and the Irish People under the Government of England (1844), where it is least relevant to the topic and the material; in most of the later works its presence is more or less central. Obviously, Smiles’s idea to “illustrate and enforce” perseverance with self-help, of which he speaks in his Autobiography, was a symptom, one of many, of his gradual liberation from the verbal automatism of his doctrinal early environment.

II

“Self-help” is the entrance and backdoor keyword to Smiles’s personal ideology, an expression he himself helped brim with echoes of laissez-faire dislike of state intrusion and initiatives in mass education like Lord Brougham’s Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Yet it was Thomas Carlyle who tended to use it much earlier, initially in his private correspondence, and somewhat later in his literary works. Thus in a letter to his wife-to-be, Jane Welsh, dating from 13 February 1822, he names “self-help” the sense of forsaken uprootedness a young man (like himself at the time) may come to feel after entering adult life and – possibly – falling in love:

There are wild retreats, indeed, in which all minds may seek refuge. I know it but too well — the feeling of recklessness and stormy self-help, when friends grow cold, and the world seems to cast us off, and the heart gathers force from its own wretchedness… There is strength here and dignity… but alas! do I need to say that you are the last of all earthly beings against whom I could wish to entertain such sentiments. (A. Carlyle, I: 30)

Here Carlyle is at his most personal and confessional. There may also be a literary background involved here, a projection of the tumultuous inner life of Goethe’s Werther, only centred around a psychological axle, thus offering a winning alternative to the well-known fictional suicide. Carlyle admired Goethe, and two years later, in 1824, published his own translation of Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (Goethe). His opinion on The Sorrows of Young Werther proves to be more provisional, as we can judge from his 1828 essay on Goethe, published in Foreign

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10 After reaching adulthood, Smiles secularized his views and values almost entirely. The issue has been properly discussed by Adrian Jarvis (4-22) in the mode of a debate with earlier researchers (Travers; Ritvo).
This, however, may well suggest that in the above-quoted excerpt Carlyle, eager for his beloved’s attention, actually attempts through using “self-help” to inscribe himself into the letter as an improvement on the shared knowledge of them both about the epistolary Werther.

Still later, the said expression surfaced in literary publications – first, in an obscure piece of fiction titled *Cruthers and Jonson or The Outskirts of Life*, published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1831, and then in his seminal *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) and *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). With these, however, the expression, though keeping its basic significance, is more particularly oriented. It is integrated in a Romantic apology of the authentic Scottish individual, raw, close to Nature, all muscle and mettle, yet open-hearted and noble-spirited, a rustic personality fighting a losing battle for keeping his unique self intact against the advance of urban standardisation. Thus in *Cruthers and Jonson*, a story about two friends who manage to preserve their vow to help each other in times of dire need, the first of them is merited as being an exact replica of the outlined Romantic archetype:

Cruthers looked upon himself as a fortunate person. He had found a thriving farm, a well-replenished purse awaiting him; he possessed an active, hardy spirit, and "four strong bones;" and, having no rank to maintain, no man's humour but his own to gratify, he felt a certain sufficiency and well-providedness about him, out of which it was natural that a sort of careless independence and frank self-help should spring and find their nourishment. He was, in fact, a ruddy-faced, strong-limbed, large, good-natured, yet indomitable fellow. There was nothing of the lion in his aspect; yet if you had looked upon his broad Scotch countenance, bespeaking so much force, and shrewdness, and unwearied perseverance, the substantial snugness of his attire, the attitude of slow, unpretending fearlessness with which he bore himself — there was none you would have hesitated more to injure, none whose enmity and friendship would have seemed more strongly contrasted. (T. Carlyle, *Cruthers*, 329)

11 “For Werter, infusing itself into the core and whole spirit of Literature, gave birth to a race of sentimentalists, who have raged and wailed in every part of the world; till better light dawned on them, or at worst, exhausted

Nature laid herself to sleep, and it was discovered that lamenting was an unproductive labour.” (T. Carlyle, “Goethe”, 37-38)

12 *Fraser’s Magazine* 2:12 (Jan 1831). 691-705.

“Careless independence and frank self-help”: peculiarities of a self-reliant, self-subsistent individual aiming to stay unchanged against the advance of urban civilization and polite society. The attitude is heroic, all the more tragically so because owned by a meek character. This is *Self-Help* before Smiles, the noble savage on the margins of the social contract, a set of human qualities extolled because uncontaminated by cultivation. *Sartor Resartus* offers a very similar portrayal in the chapter “Pedagogy” where the education of the protagonist, young Teufelsdröckh, is discussed. The expression emerges amid a polemic against the abstruse uselessness of rational knowledge as they teach it at universities. Here Carlyle defends the individual’s right to independent choice whether in picking a way of living or in developing a plan of study:

Thus from poverty does the strong educe nobler wealth; thus in the destitution of the wild desert does our young Ishmael acquire for himself the highest of all possessions, that ofSelf-help. (T. Carlyle, *Sartor*, 119)

In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* the use is identical to that in *Cruthers and Jonson*, only that the virtue of “self-help” is attributed to eminent historical persons as disparate as Muhammad (“Mahomet”) and Dr. Samuel Johnson:

Withal I like Mahomet for his total freedom from cant. He is a rough self-helping son of the wilderness; does not pretend to be what he is not. There is no ostentatious pride in him; but neither does he go much upon humility: he is there as he can be, in cloak and shoes of his own clouting; speaks plainly to all manner of Persian Kings, Greek Emperors, what it is they are bound to do; knows well enough, about himself, “the respect due unto thee.” (T. Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 116-17)

And:

As for Johnson, I have always considered him to be, by nature, one of our great English souls. … One remembers always that story of the shoes at Oxford: the rough, seamy-faced, rawboned College Servitor stalking about, in winter-season, with his shoes worn out; how the charitable Gentleman Commoner secretly places a new pair at his door; and the rawboned Servitor, lifting them, looking at them near, with his dim eyes, with what thoughts, — pitches them out of window! Wet feet, mud, frost, hunger or what you will; but not beggary: we cannot stand beggary! Rude stubborn self-help here; a whole world of squalor, rudeness, confused misery and want, yet of nobleness and manfulness withal. (T. Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 288-90)

Despite the probability, Smiles hardly gleaned the idea about the “self-help” formula directly from Carlyle. He may have known Carlyle’s name as early as the 1820s, during his childhood in Haddington, when Carlyle was courting a local beauty, the mentioned Jane (“Jeannie”) Welsh, daughter of the chief doctor in town, whose life he later famously ruined by marrying her. Smiles was eleven years younger than
Jeannie and did not find her very attractive (S. Smiles, Autobiography, 5) yet he may have disliked the intrusion of an outsider into the bland unchangeableness of his native “small world”. At any rate, he kept a lifelong resentment towards his elder compatriot, co-ideologue in the Scottish Protestant work ethic and competitor in the battle for the hearts of the Victorian readership. Sometimes this attitude surfaces even when he praises Carlyle for what he has done. In Brief Biographies (1861), his American project of a book, compiled mostly of previously published material at the request of Ticknor & Fields and issued immediately after Self-Help, the chapter on Carlyle teems with similar examples. For instance:

He has uttered, with the voice as of an old Hebrew prophet, the feeling of disquiet and unrest which pervades society; and his "Woe! Woe!" and "Mene, Tekel, Upharsin!" have startled many in the midst of their pleasant dreams of peace and progress. He is the Jeremiah of modern days, full of wailing at the backslidings of our race. He recognizes no soundness in us, from the crown of the head to the sole of the feet. All is foul and unclean. We are but the creatures of shams, creeds, and formulas, without any real or God-like life in us, — worshippers of clothes, steam, machinery, sordid materialism, and Hudson statues! (S. Smiles, Thomas Carlyle, 270)

Still the question remains, how did the expression “self-help” reach Smiles? Where, and when, did he get it? The eponymous book had two earlier, shorter versions before it emerged in 1859. Both were lectures before working-class education clubs. Smiles himself mentions one of them in his Autobiography, a public address he gave on “The Education of the Working Classes” to the Leeds Mutual Improvement Society in 1845 (131-34). In his article “The Origins of a Victorian Bestseller – An Unacknowledged Debt” (1970) Alexander Tyrrell supplies a missing link, naming a still earlier source, a speech Smiles made two years previously (1843) before the Holbeck and New Wortley Youth’s Guardian Society, another club focused on mutual education. An account of that charmingly minor event was offered in Leeds Times (15 July 1843):

After the report had been read, its adoption was moved by James Richardson, Esq., and seconded by Dr. Smiles; the former gentleman ably enforcing the necessity of confidence or faith in Truth; the latter the duty of self-reliance, self-respect, and perseverance in the attainment of knowledge, on the part of the young, illustrating his subject with numerous anecdotes from the biographies of distinguished men. (“Holbeck and New Wortley Youth’s”)

The excerpt ascertains that the frame of Self-Help existed in a more or less recognisable form as early as 1843. But what about the title word? Did it trigger itself into use about that same time? Tyrrell states that Smiles took it from two American Transcendentalist sources, William Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a lot can be said in support of his case. In 1839, three months after he had become editor of Leeds Times, Smiles reviewed on its pages Channing’s recent Self-Culture, a book about organised self-education on a large scale, praising it generally, yet doubting
whether Channing’s ideas were applicable to the British working-class situation (“Self-Culture”). To Tyrrell, however, Emerson’s *Man the Reformer* was the main source for the word. It was a public address Emerson delivered in 1841 before a Boston equivalent to a British Mechanics’ Institute and published the following year in a separate volume. Here is the key passage:

Can we not learn the lesson of self-help? Society is full of infirm people, who incessantly summon others to serve them. They contrive everywhere to exhaust for their single comfort the entire means and appliances of that luxury to which our invention has yet attained. … One must have been born and bred with them to know how to prepare a meal for their learned stomach. Meantime, they never bestir themselves to serve another person; not they! they have a great deal more to do for themselves than they can possibly perform, nor do they once perceive the cruel joke of their lives, but the more odious they grow, the sharper is the tone of their complaining and craving. (Emerson, *Addresses*, 37)

The passage sounds like a restatement of the entire Smilesian doctrine as it is expounded in *Self-Help*: that governamental control mars the character of the individuals who comprise society, that education, living standard and success in life are personal objectives which can be achieved almost only on an individual basis. The facts, as Tyrrell presents them, seem to speak in favour of his conclusion. Smiles was impressed enough by Emerson’s book to publish bits of it in *Leeds Times* – and once an abridged version of the whole of it. Ultimately, Tyrrell had not registered an earlier link between Smiles’s title and another’s use of the same expression.

Yet an Emersonian link back to the roots of Smiles’s “self-help” formula would mean little more than a substitution for the missing direct connection to Carlyle. Emerson was profoundly influenced by Carlyle. The two met in August 1833 at Carlyle’s then home base on Craigenputtock farm, during Emerson’s first visit to England (Emerson, *English Traits*, 10), thus starting on a lifelong term of friendship and collaboration. It was mostly Emerson’s driving force behind the popularisation of *Sartor Resartus* among American intellectual circles and its Boston book-form publication, by John Murray & Co., which preceded by two years the first British edition of 1838. Paradoxically, in the very same period when American authors usually sought recognition in Britain in order to gain status in their own country, Carlyle started on his way to celebrity position by finding his first admiring audience on American soil.

So, Smiles’s Emersonian link to the “self-help” formula, advanced by Tyrrell, seems to have had an earlier, though indirect, source – which makes the overall picture, if nothing else, a little denser. But there is also an earlier direct link which Tyrrell obviously has not noticed. In one of the September issues of *Leeds Times* for 1836, two years and a quarter before the coming of Smiles as editor of the newspaper, we can read towards the end of the first paragraph in the editorial the following bit:

Heaven helps those who help themselves, and self-help is the only effectual help.
This is an elegant variation, with all highlights practically quoted, of the first paragraph in Smiles’s work. The author of the leading article is not named, as was then the common newspaper practice. But even so, he is not Emerson; nor is he Samuel Smiles, because he took control of Leeds Times with the first issue for 1839. The article is titled “The Duties of the People”, and was written by Robert Nicoll, a Scotsman and a poet, who, in that period, was the editor of the newspaper.

At the time he wrote this, Nicoll, a young man of twenty-two, had been editing Leeds Times for three months with dedication, fervour and Jacobin idealism. His addressee in the article does not actually coincide with Smiles’s in Self-Help. Nicoll’s addressee is more general and less clear-cut. Here, as elsewhere, the young author constantly refers to “the People”, to “Justice” and to “Truth”, all three words capital-lettered; his rhetoric is high-pitched, as in a speech of a Radical orator tackling the condition-of-England issue, and barely missing the level of a sermon delivered by a charismatic religious leader who has put his millenarianism to the uses of class struggle. Here is a sample:

By the People we mean everyone who has his bread to earn, whether by head or hand—every man who has a family to support and educate—every man, in short, who would be better for having his loaf at half its present price, and other necessary and useful articles in proportion. … If they do their duty firmly and unflinchingly, inclining neither to the right hand nor to the left, neither fearing nor favouring any party, there are bright days in store for our native land; but if, on the contrary, they allow themselves to be deluded—if they trust to men or to parties the execution of those things which they themselves should perform, theirs will be the loss, theirs the misery, and theirs the dishonour. … In these circumstances, the People must rely on themselves and on themselves alone. ([Nicoll])

Immediately after that come the words that represent the germ of the beginning of Samuel Smiles’s Self-Help. It is noteworthy that Nicoll does not preach political strategies here, although he had quite a large group of followers among the young radicals in West Riding, Yorkshire—what he stands for is individual rightness of heart and of mind as a corrective from below to the political strategies comprising the everyday activities in parliament. Similarly, in numerous articles, he appeals for a

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14 Here is the beginning of Self-Help, for the sake of comparison on the spot: “‘Heaven helps those who help themselves’ is a well-worn maxim, embodying in a small compass the results of vast human experience. The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength.” (Smiles 1)

15 “Intellectually productive Scotland contributed 86 of the 466 editors who are known to have managed one or more British newspapers in the 1840s. Of these 86, 32 edited English newspapers. The second most productive source of editors, London, which produced 56, was more niggardly in exporting its editors.” (Roberts, Still More, 15)
total restructuring of the House of Commons, denouncing both Whigs and Tories as indistinguishable from each other in their eagerness to wallow in corruption; as for the House of Lords, he preaches no less enthusiastically for its complete eradication.

Nicol’s attitude and style very much embody the political turmoil in Leeds and in other new industrial towns, all of which rose to representation after the Reform Act of 1832 only to suddenly find that they had no chance of a fair deal thanks to an obsolete system of traditional privileges. Certainly, there is in his commentaries a lot of rhetoric overshadowing analysis. Yet the pieces he wrote seemingly had a salubrious effect on the civic climate in the provincial town. Indirectly, he preached self-respect to his local readers, made them feel fully-fledged citizens endowed with a collection of important rights. He also published his own poetry, equally radical, on the pages of the newspaper, thus adding touches of personal feeling and high aesthetics to the factional culture he projected on his audience. With all or any of these, he appealed particularly to the young Radical enthusiasts in the vicinity and actually increased their numbers, raising at the same time the newspaper’s circulation three times within less than half a year (Drummond 190-93; see also Rogers 226). His untimely death in December 1837, due to poor health additionally marred by overwork, made him very much missed among his friends, followers and colleagues, to say nothing of those who ruled the newspaper and were afraid that the circulation might start dwindling. This is more or less the context in which Samuel Smiles was invited, in November 1838, to take the editor’s post in Leeds Times. Meanwhile, for a year, the post had been given to Charles Hooton, a friend and collaborator of Nicoll’s in the local political struggles, but his choice proved not quite successful. Having all Nicoll’s bitingness of rhetoric without Nicoll’s enthusiastic, fiery, self-effacing charisma, soon he found himself embroiled in a series of unnecessary scandals with other local periodicals and their readerships, the sales of Leeds Times started to drop, and the owner, naturally, started looking for a swift replacement.

It was in that time of need that Smiles was spotted on the literary horizon. About how exactly it occurred there is still some unresolved cluster of mythology. There are those who state that he had already been a cherished contributor of articles to Leeds Times, so it was easy for his name to rise in the minds of all concerned and outshine the other possible candidates. No such articles, however, are known to exist. He was rather heeded vicariously, through his contributions to another newspaper, Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle, whose editor, Dr. Thomas Murray, supported reform, and lectured on political economy with a special emphasis on the moral virtues of labour, patience and sobriety (Travers, “Samuel Smiles and the Origins”, 163). In this way, Murray himself seems to have been a seminal formative influence on young

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16 Even thirty years later, in Rev. Taylor’s comprehensive “Biographia Leodiensis; or, Biographical Sketches of the Worthies of Leeds and Neighbourhood, from the Norman Conquest to the Present Time” (1865), Nicoll is referred to as “the lamented Robert Nicoll” (Taylor 511).

17 From 2769 in the spring of 1838 to 1846 in the spring of the following year (Harrison 74), when Smiles was still in his period of initial accommodation.
Smiles who later always stressed in his writings the all-importance of particularly this kind of non-militant individual self-improvement. Thus in November 1838 Smiles was considered by Frederick Hobson, the proprietor of Leeds Times, expressly fit to take the editing post in the newspaper, and following the ideological and stylistic steps of the recently deceased Nicoll, to hopefully lift it back to former glory and circulation.\(^{18}\)

Smiles was very different from Nicoll. In terms of general mindset, both were equally eager to work for the betterment of the condition of the masses. Smiles’s mental outlook, however, was less revolutionary, leaning rather towards the doctrinal platform of the Society for the Distribution of Useful Knowledge. But he seems to have badly needed the job, if for no other reason, just for the sake of finding a way out of Haddington where he felt kind of chained. His autobiography gives ample data in support of such interpretation. Here is one of those passages, telling of a conversation Smiles had, after the death of a friend of his, with an older colleague in town:

During my interview with Dr Mackintosh at Portobello, he asked me how I was getting on at Haddington.

"I am not getting on," I said, "I am going off."

"How is that?"

"Too many doctors," I answered; "more than enough to doctor double the population."

"Well," he rejoined, "remember that a rolling stone gathers no moss."

"Very true," I said; "but while I have been settled there, I have gathered none whatever: I think I had better begin to roll!"

"Well, of course, you are the best judge."

And so we parted. (S. Smiles, Autobiography, 59-60)

Whatever his own views, the only chance Smiles had to get his new job and keep it for longer time was to start on a long, hard journey of self-inscription into the expectations of the local Nicoll-generated audience. For the purpose, he, practically inevitably, had to read everything that Nicoll had written and published while editor in Leeds Times; had to virtually memorize chunks of Nicoll’s writings in order to psychologically merge in his outlook, style and rhetoric\(^{19}\); had to, ultimately, fight a

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\(^{18}\) Another piece of mythology says that Smiles was invited to take the editor’s post in Leeds Times. No, he was not. The idea stems from a misinterpretation of a passage in his autobiography. Here is another passage in the same source, which tells the unequivocal truth: “[W]hen an advertisement appeared in Tait’s Magazine for an editor of the Leeds Times in the room of Robert Nicoll, the poet, who died in December 1837, I applied for the position. I received an answer from the proprietor, requesting me to send a specimen of my powers, and mentioning as the subject, an article on the Suffrage. I wrote one, and sent it by return of post. It was approved...” (Smiles, Autobiography, 64)

\(^{19}\) The early leading articles Smiles wrote as editor are particularly interesting as hybrids of the adopted Jacobin discourse and his own quite peaceable thematic leanings. Thus in a leader titled “The Education of the People” we come across the following passage, so full of sober statement and
hard inner battle for his own self-identity and ideology, for he was a different ideological person, in which battle he was both his own self and his own rival, a twin and a stranger to himself. In this process, the accidental “self-help” statement of Nicoll’s obviously stuck in his memory ready to be retrieved much later in more comprehensive uses. Thus, in the light of all that has been argued so far, I think it might be considered sufficiently proven that Samuel Smiles’s popular use of the term “self-help” should be dated back to 3 September 1836 and to Robert Nicoll’s editorial in *Leeds Times* “The Duties of the People”.

frenzied punctuation: “Is it not a sacred, a bounden duty in a man to educate himself; or when he does not, *cannot*, by reason of his primitive ignorance, feel the force of the obligation—is it not equally the duty of intelligent man to educate his unintelligent fellow—his brother man? We take higher grounds, and hold it to be a sin of ingratitude on the part of those whose means are greater, and minds are more cultivated than their fellow creatures, to withhold their aid in elevating them from the lower debasements of humanity.” ([S. Smiles], “The Education”)
WORKS CITED


